

The Best and the Worst of Times

2002

FALL HUNTING OUTLOOK

By Randy Kreil

Background photo omitted.



***“It was the best of times,
it was the worst of times.”***

This universally recognized opening line from Charles Dickens’ classic novel “A Tale of Two Cities” is the best one-line summary I can think of to describe the fall 2002 hunting season. Despite high wildlife populations and excellent hunting opportunities, many people aren’t as happy as they could be.

As a high school senior at Devils Lake, I first read Dickens’ timeless tale of life during the turmoil of the French Revolution. We had an amazing teacher named Gladys Lowe who somehow inspired most of the senior class to take an elective course in English Literature. Among other long-deceased British authors, we endured the torture of Dickens’ grammar and punctuation and were rewarded by experiencing what life was like for people going through monumental changes in their world. They experienced the full range of emotions while struggling to find lasting balance.

When it comes to the tradition of hunting in North Dakota, we are faced with an important struggle to find balance.

For the moment, populations of some waterfowl, big game, and upland game species are at or near historic highs. In the last few years, harvest rates, hunter success, and the number of people hunting have all increased. Hunter expectations are rising despite overwhelming historical knowledge that current wildlife populations are not sustainable over time.

This wealth of wildlife and opportunities has created changes, challenges, and even turmoil.

People want high populations of animals such as deer and Canada geese for hunting, but there is a negative side if these populations get too high.

Winter depredation by big game on stored livestock feed supplies is always a concern and our record high deer population – which we are actively trying to reduce – will create significant challenges should we have a difficult winter. In addition to unprecedented early September hunting seasons for Canada geese, we have issued special permits for direct control to certain landowners who have experienced chronic and substantial crop damage.

We have expanded the fall turkey season to help control wild turkey numbers.

And of course, we have taken extreme measures to curb population growth of snow geese in an effort to reduce damage and save the Arctic ecosystem on which these birds depend for nesting and rearing their young.

We are also faced with relatively new social challenges, such as changes in hunting opportunities due to greater competition for access, increased emphasis on commercial aspects of hunting, and more nonresidents wanting to hunt in North Dakota. At times these complicated issues get over-simplified and are portrayed as a conflict between resident hunters and their desire for access, and landowners and people in small rural communities who want to add to their economic base.

North Dakota citizens and elected decision makers will address many of these social issues in the near future, with an objective of resolving them in a manner that develops lasting balance. With serious and sincere dialogue and an eye toward compromise, maybe we can all avoid the Bastille and a trip to the guillotine.

Following are insights from North Dakota Game and Fish Department species biologists, relating to hunting opportunities in fall 2002. We hope they will provide the information hunters need to plan fall activities.

Rice Lake south of Strasburg in Emmons County hosted thousands of snow geese on November 24, 2001. Waterfowl were driven south by a snowstorm that hit Canada and northern North Dakota a month earlier. Many geese and ducks found conditions favorable south of Interstate 94 and stayed until freeze-up.



Harold Umber

White-tailed Deer

*Roger Johnson, Big Game Supervisor,
Devils Lake*

White-tailed deer numbers are high throughout much of the state, particularly in the north and east. The only area where white-tailed deer numbers have declined is along the Little Missouri River and license numbers in this part of the state have been reduced accordingly.

Elsewhere, in response to a growing white-tailed deer herd, we have increased regular deer gun licenses for fall 2002 to a record 116,925. Most additional licenses are for antlerless deer. Hunters should note that second and third licenses, for "any-antlerless" deer can also be used during the regular archery and muzzle-loader seasons, as long as they are used within the hunting unit and for the deer type printed on the license.

As with regular deer gun licenses, the number of white-tailed deer muzzle-loader licenses increased as well, with the total reaching 2,240.

Mule Deer

*Bruce Stillings, Big Game Biologist,
Dickinson*

The 2001 fall mule deer reproduction survey indicated below average fawn recruitment, which in turn was reflected in the 2002 spring mule deer population index in the badlands. Density of mule deer per square mile in the badlands was 6.8 in 2002, compared to 10.2 in 2001.



Harold Umber



Harold Umber

Bighorn sheep live in western North Dakota badlands.

Due to the slight mule deer population decrease, the number of licenses was reduced by 275 – to 4,875 – in an attempt to further encourage population recovery from the setback experienced during the 1996-97 winter.

Mule deer hunters had a successful 2001 season. Hunters with licenses for antlered mule deer had an 84 percent success rate, and 83 percent of hunters with antlerless mule deer licenses filled their tags.

Moose and Elk

Roger Johnson

North Dakota's prairie moose population continues to thrive. The only area where the population is down is in the Pembina Hills, where moose numbers have been down for a number of years, but are starting to show improvement.

The overall harvest in 2001 was 137 moose for a 91 percent success rate. Aerial winter counts of moose areas were not possible in 2001-02 because of lack of snow in all areas of the state.

The elk population in North Dakota is stable. Hunters tagged 106 elk in 2001 for a success rate of 48 percent. Both moose and elk hunters can expect similar success in 2002.

White-tailed deer numbers are high and a record number of licenses were authorized for this fall's hunting season.

Bighorn Sheep

*Brett Wiedmann, Bighorn Sheep
Biologist, Dickinson*

The 2002 season should produce good hunting opportunities for the four bighorn sheep license holders, as North Dakota's sheep range north of Interstate 94 has a good number of mature rams. South of I-94, however, there is no open bighorn



sheep season, as the sheep population in that part of the state remains low.

In 2001, the Game and Fish Department issued four bighorn sheep licenses and all hunters were successful.

So far, 2002 has been a good year for lamb production and recruitment, as 25 lambs were still observed as of early July. While sure-footed and able to elude most predators at that stage in their young lives, their next hurdle is the weaning process – when they no longer depend on their mother for food – that occurs in the fall. Many lambs succumb to disease after being weaned because they no longer receive antibodies and nutrients from their mother's milk.

In July 2001 biologists observed 14 lambs still alive, of which only nine survived.

The Department is currently working with the state of Oregon and the state veterinarian on a possible translocation of 20-32 bighorn sheep into the badlands. If sheep are available and can pass importation requirements, the priority release site is the Kinley Plateau area south of I-94. If we can get enough sheep from Oregon, a second release site is the Ice Box Canyon area north of I-94.

During the past two winters small numbers of bighorns were moved from northern herds into the area south of I-94. Both groups of transplanted animals are doing well and producing much-needed lambs.

Pronghorn

Bruce Stillings

The North Dakota pronghorn population was estimated at nearly 6,300, based on an aerial survey of almost 12,000 square miles in July 2002. The statewide estimate is similar to 2001, but the concentration of animals varied considerably between the two years. Most notably, pronghorn in the western Bowman County management region (units 4A and 4B) were down 51 percent from 2001, while the number of pronghorn in Unit 3A (increase of 76 percent) and Unit 2A (increase of 61 percent) was much higher than 2001.

The allocation of fall 2002 licenses reflects the changes in distribution and density: considerably fewer licenses in the extreme southwest, and more licenses in other units in the badlands and Slope regions of the state. Overall hunter success for the 2001 pronghorn season was 85 percent.

Pronghorn experienced a mild winter in 2001-02 and had a much higher young-to-doe ratio in 2002 – 0.77 young/doe compared to 0.58 in 2001. Biologists are encouraged by the increased reproductive success observed this spring.

Sandhill Cranes

Stan C. Kohn, Migratory Gamebird Biologist

The Mid-Continent Population of sandhill cranes has been relatively stable since the early 1980s and the birds now use a large portion of the state. Because of this, last fall was the first year the crane season was open east of U.S. Highway 281. Hunters seemed to enjoy this additional opportunity. This new area has a shorter season of 37 days and a daily bag limit of two cranes, while a 58-day season and a three-bird bag is available in the remainder of the state.

Cranes have been migrating into North Dakota later each fall so the Department has slowly adjusted the season to coincide with the migration. Consequently, the season in 2002 will open one week later than in 2001.

At this writing, it is too early to predict production for cranes breeding in Canada and Alaska. An average production year will produce a fall flight through North Dakota similar to 2001. Department personnel will continue to measure harvested birds for subspecies composition, and will monitor harvest of large sandhill cranes, which are not as abundant as lesser sandhill cranes.

Preliminary estimates from the 2001 season indicate 3,002 hunters (up 21 percent from 2000) actively hunted sandhill cranes in North Dakota and harvested 5,152 birds, about the same as in 2000.

Pronghorn went into spring in good shape after a mild winter. Reproductive success was improved in 2002 as compared to 2001.



Harold Umber

Waterfowl

Michael A. Johnson, Game Management Section Leader

Prospects for this year's seasons look good. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, despite lower duck numbers revealed in its spring survey, again offered states the "liberal" package of season regulations, which means we can maintain our 74-day season and have a daily limit of six ducks, including five mallards.

The liberal package offering also allows northern states to open their duck seasons a week earlier than has been allowed, which means North Dakota's duck and goose seasons will open September 21, instead of September 28. This extra week of hunting in September is an excellent opportunity for pursuing blue-winged teal and wood ducks.

In addition, only residents are allowed to hunt during the first week. Nonresidents may begin hunting ducks and geese in North Dakota starting September 28.

The number of nonresident waterfowl hunting licenses is set at 30,000 this year. While the zones remain the same, nonresident hunters who do not choose the seven-day statewide license will have to choose

one of the three zones and hunt only in that zone for their license period.

While the liberal package is still in effect this year, we all need to be concerned about next year because of extremely poor habitat conditions in Canada and parts of the U.S. Prairie Pothole Region. Drought and widespread haying of CRP may have a negative effect on next year's breeding duck population.

North Dakota's breeding duck numbers were high in 2002, however, possibly because the survey was conducted when many ducks were still unsettled or hadn't migrated through yet. Brood surveys conducted in July point toward good to excellent local duck production. However, poor duck nesting conditions in Canada dampen prospects for a late migration of ducks from the north.

Resident Canada goose numbers remain high, although early nesting efforts may have taken a hit from inclement spring weather.

Full-day hunting for geese two days a week will continue this year, but the Department is evaluating this management option and will provide opportunity

for input at district advisory board meetings in November and December.

The 2001 hunting season was unusually warm, dry, and mild until October 24. This accounted for different migration patterns among waterfowl. Snow geese arrived late and small Canada geese came early. On October 24, more than a foot of snow fell across northern North Dakota, which forced most waterfowl south of Interstate 94. This unusual weather pattern and migration produced a different type of year for hunters.

Preliminary harvest data indicates the number of waterfowl hunters was up 6.8 percent at 65,339 (35,310 resident and 30,029 nonresidents). Duck harvest was up 21 percent to 433,851, while goose harvest was down six percent to 254,169.

Hunters spent an average of 8.25 days in the field – 4.0 hunting geese and 4.2 hunting ducks. Hunter reports indicate an estimated harvest of 255,000 mallards and 175,800 Canada geese. Spring light goose harvest was probably small, similar to 2001, due to nice weather. Hunters bagged 38,000 Canada geese during the 2001 September Canada goose season.

Photo Omitted

WATERFOWL SEASON DETAILS

EARLY CANADA GOOSE SEASON

Opens: Sunday, September 1

Closes: Friday, September 20

Shooting hours: 1/2 hour before sunrise to sunset

Bag limit: 5 Canada geese daily, 10 in possession

Note: Nonresidents must select one of the three zones and stay in that zone during the early Canada goose season, or choose the seven-day statewide license. Days hunted during the early goose season count against the 14-day maximum for nonresidents.

YOUTH WATERFOWL SEASON

(For legally licensed residents and nonresidents ages 15 and younger)

Opens: Saturday, September 14

Closes: Sunday, September 15

Shooting hours: 1/2 hour before sunrise to sunset

Bag limit: Same as for regular duck and goose season, except: Since youth season is on at same time as early Canada goose season, youth hunters may take five Canada geese daily, with a possession limit of 10.

While adults accompanying youths may not hunt ducks during the youth season, adults may hunt Canada geese while accompanying a youngster, because of the open early Canada goose season.

REGULAR DUCK SEASON

Low Plains Unit:

Opens: Saturday, September 21

Closes: Sunday, December 1

Shooting hours: 1/2 hour before sunrise to sunset.

High Plains Unit:

Opens: Saturday, September 21

Closes: Sunday, December 1

Opens: Saturday, December 7

Closes: Sunday, December 29

Shooting hours: 1/2 hour before sunrise to sunset

Daily limits for both units: 6 ducks, which may include: 5 mallards (2 hens), 3 scaup, 2 redhead, 2 wood duck and 1 pintail (pintail season is open only from Sept. 21 - Oct. 29). Taking of canvasbacks is not allowed in 2002. Possession limit is twice the daily limit.

The High Plains unit is the portion of North Dakota that, starting at the South Dakota border, is west and south of a line beginning with U.S. Highway 83 and I-94 to Wilton, then following ND Highway 41 to ND 53, then west on 53 back to US 83, then north to US 2, then west to the Williams County line, then north and west along the Williams and Divide county lines to the Canadian border. The Low Plains unit is that portion of North Dakota east of the High Plains unit.

CANADA GEESE

Low Plains Unit (*unit boundaries are the same as duck unit boundaries*):

Opens: Saturday, September 21

Closes: Sunday, December 15

Shooting hours: 1/2 hour before sunrise to 1 p.m. through

Oct. 26, then 1/2 hour before sunrise to 2 p.m. On

Wednesdays and Saturdays starting October 12, shooting hours for geese are 1/2 hour before sunrise to sunset.

Daily limits for both units: 3 Canada geese daily and possession limit is 6.

High Plains Unit:

Opens: Saturday, September 21

Closes: Sunday, December 1

Opens: Saturday, December 7

Closes: Saturday, December 21

Shooting hours: 1/2 hour before sunrise to 1 p.m. through

Oct. 26, then 1/2 hour before sunrise to 2 p.m. On

Wednesdays and Saturdays starting October 12, shooting hours for geese are 1/2 hour before sunrise to sunset.

LIGHT (SNOW) GEESE

Opens: Saturday, September 21

Closes: Saturday, December 15

Shooting hours: 1/2 hour before sunrise to 1 p.m. through

Oct. 26, then 1/2 hour before sunrise to 2 p.m. On

Wednesdays and Saturdays starting October 12, shooting hours for geese are 1/2 hour before sunrise to sunset.

Daily limit: 20. There is no possession limit for light geese.

WHITE-FRONTED GEESE

Opens: Saturday, September 21

Closes: Saturday, December 15

Shooting hours: 1/2 hour before sunrise to 1 p.m. through

Oct. 26, then 1/2 hour before sunrise to 2 p.m. On

Wednesdays and Saturdays starting October 12, shooting hours for geese are 1/2 hour before sunrise to sunset.

Daily limit: 2, possession limit is 4.

For additional information see the 2002 North Dakota Waterfowl Hunting Guide.

SNIBE	
Open Area:	Statewide
Opens:	Sept. 21
Closes:	Dec. 1
Daily Limit:	8
Possession Limit:	16
Shooting Hours:	1/2 hour before sunrise to sunset

WOODCOCK	
Open Area:	Statewide
Opens:	Sept. 21
Closes:	Nov. 3
Daily Limit:	3
Possession Limit:	6
Shooting Hours:	1/2 hour before sunrise to sunset

CROWS	
Open Area:	Statewide
Fall Season	Opens: Aug. 17
	Closes: Oct. 27
Spring Season	Opens: Mar. 15
	Closes: Apr. 29
Daily Limit:	There is no limit on crows.
Possession Limit:	
Shooting Hours:	1/2 hour before sunrise to sunset

In addition to the crow season, crows may be taken when committing or about to commit depredations as specified in Federal law (50CFR21.43).

HUNGARIAN PARTRIDGE	
Open Area:	Statewide
Opens:	Sept. 14
Closes:	Jan. 5
Daily Limit:	3
Possession Limit:	12
Shooting Hours:	1/2 hour before sunrise to sunset

CANADA GEESE (Experimental Sept. Season)	
Open Area:	Statewide
Opens:	Sept. 1
Closes:	Sept. 20
Daily Limit:	5
Possession Limit:	10
Shooting Hours:	1/2 hour before sunrise to sunset

Besides possessing the required licenses, hunters must be HIP certified. Residents and nonresidents are eligible to hunt.

RUFFED GROUSE	
Opens:	Sept. 14
Closes:	Jan. 5
Daily Limit:	3
Possession Limit:	12
Shooting Hours:	1/2 hour before sunrise to sunset

Open Area – Bottineau, Rolette, Cavalier, Pembina, Walsh, and Dunn counties in North Dakota. Also that portion of the J. Clark Salyer National Wildlife Refuge in McHenry County lying south of the Upham-Willow City Road is open to ruffed grouse hunting.

TREE SQUIRRELS	
Open Area:	Statewide
Opens:	Sept. 14
Closes:	Jan. 5
Daily Limit:	4
Possession Limit:	12
Shooting Hours:	1/2 hour before sunrise to sunset

Tree squirrels may be taken only with firearms loaded with shot, rimfire and muzzleloading firearms, or with bow and arrows legal for taking upland game.

COCK PHEASANT	
Open Area:	*Early Season **Late Season
Opens:	Oct. 12 Oct. 26
Closes:	Jan. 5 Jan. 5
Daily Limit:	3
Possession Limit:	12
Shooting Hours:	1/2 hour before sunrise to sunset

MALE PHEASANTS ONLY MAY BE TAKEN

*Early season is statewide except for Late Season area.

**Late Season includes area in Williams and McKenzie counties starting where BN Railroad enters North Dakota, then east on the railroad tracks to the west boundary of the Trenton Wildlife Management Area (southwest of Trenton) then south and east on the boundary of the Trenton WMA to the Missouri River, then directly across the river, then west to the Yellowstone River, then south and west on the Yellowstone River to the Montana border, then north to the point of origin.

BOBCAT – HUNTING, TRAPPING
Opens: Nov. 9 – Closes: Mar. 16

BOBCAT SNARING
Opens: Nov. 23 – Closes: Mar. 16

Open only in the area south and west of the Missouri River.

The pelt and carcass of each bobcat must be presented to Game and Fish Department personnel for inspection and tagging prior to sale or transfer of possession, but no later than 14 days after the close of the season. Absolutely no bobcat pelt will be tagged until the animal is skinned and presented with the intact carcass. The carcass then becomes the property of the Department. No fur dealer shall possess or purchase an untagged bobcat.

RED FOX, GRAY FOX, COYOTE, RACCOON AND BADGER HUNTING OR TRAPPING
Open year-round (officially from Apr. 1 – Mar. 31 of each year)

In addition, red fox, gray fox, and coyote may be hunted at any hour, from November 16, 2002 through March 23, 2003. Any hunter who engages in the hunting of red fox, gray fox, or coyote during the time from 1/2 hour after sunset to 1/2 hour before sunrise, must hunt exclusively on foot and use a predator call. The use of a spotlight or any other artificial light is prohibited.

RED FOX, GRAY FOX, COYOTE, RACCOON AND BADGER SNARING
Opens: Nov. 23 – Closes: Mar. 16

SHARP-TAILED GROUSE	
Opens:	Sept. 14
Closes:	Jan. 5
Daily Limit:	3
Possession Limit:	12
Shooting Hours:	1/2 hour before sunrise to sunset

Open Area – Statewide except for: the area in southeastern North Dakota east of ND No. 32, north of ND No. 11, and south of the Sheyenne River; and an area in Grand Forks County bordered on the east by the Red River, the south by US Highway 2, the west by ND Highway 18 and the north by the Walsh and Grand Forks county line. Both areas are closed to sharp-tailed grouse hunting.

BEAVER HUNTING, TRAPPING AND UNDERWATER SNARING
Open year-round (Officially from Apr. 1 – Mar. 31 of each year)

BEAVER SNARING ON LAND
Opens: Nov. 23 – Closes: May 11

From March 17, 2003 through May 11, 2003, snares must be within 50 feet of water; they must be no greater than 4 inches off the ground and they must have a stop restricting loop size to 12 or less inches in diameter.

Beaver dams may be dismantled when their presence causes property damage.

MINK AND WEASEL TRAPPING
Opens: Oct. 26 – Closes: Mar. 16

MINK AND WEASEL SNARING
Opens: Nov. 23 – Closes: Mar. 16

WEASEL HUNTING
Opens: Oct. 26 – Closes: Mar. 16
Weasels may be hunted statewide with .22 caliber rimfire rifles or pistols, muzzleloaders of .45 caliber or smaller, longbows, and crossbows.

MUSKRAT TRAPPING
Opens: Oct. 26 – Closes: Mar. 16

MUSKRAT SNARING
Opens: Nov. 23 – Closes: Mar. 16

Muskrat huts may be opened for insertion of traps or snares; however, the huts must be restored to their approximate original condition to prevent freeze-up.

In addition, muskrats may be trapped statewide with foothold traps or colony traps using underwater sets that are at least 2 inches under water or trapped with conibear-type traps or snared with no more than 2 inches of the conibear trap or snare above the water surface from March 17, 2003 through May 11, 2003. During this time period, float-sets are prohibited, and trapping or snaring on the outside of any muskrat house or structure of any size is prohibited.

MUSKRAT HUNTING
Opens: Nov. 23 – Closes: May 11

MINK HUNTING
Opens: Nov. 23 – Closes: Mar. 16

Mink and muskrat may be hunted statewide with .22 caliber rimfire rifles or pistols, muzzleloaders of .45 caliber or smaller, longbows and crossbows.

MOURNING DOVES	
Open Area:	Statewide
Opens:	Sept. 1
Closes:	Oct. 27
Daily Limit:	15
Possession Limit:	30
Shooting Hours:	1/2 hour before sunrise to sunset

It is illegal to hunt doves or other birds resting on utility lines or fixtures adjacent to such lines.

SANDHILL CRANES		
Open Area:	ZONE 1	ZONE 2
Opens:	Sept. 21	Sept. 21
Closes:	Nov. 17	Oct. 27
Daily Limit:	3	2
Possession Limit:	6	4
Shooting Hours:	1 pm CDT Sept. 21 thru Oct. 26 1/2 hour before sunrise to: 2 pm CST Oct. 27 thru Nov. 17	

Zone 1. That portion of North Dakota west of US Highway 281.

Zone 2. That portion of North Dakota east of US Highway 281.

Hunters may not aggregate daily bag or possession limits from the two zones. (A hunter may take up to 3 cranes in one day, provided all 3 birds are taken from Zone 1, or no more than 2 birds are taken from Zone 2.)

In addition to other licenses required, sandhill crane hunters must possess a \$5 sandhill crane hunting permit available from the North Dakota Game and Fish Department's Bismarck office.

It is unlawful to shoot from open water or from a boat or other floating vessel in open water while hunting sandhill cranes.

SAGE GROUSE	
Opens:	Sept. 16
Closes:	Sept. 18
Daily Limit:	1
Possession Limit:	1
Shooting Hours:	1/2 hour before sunrise to sunset

Open Area – Area south of Interstate 94 and west of U.S. Highway 85 in southwestern North Dakota.

Mourning Doves

Stan C. Kohn

Historically, North Dakota and Kansas often have the highest average spring dove counts in the nation. However, recent spring surveys show North Dakota's breeding population of mourning doves has been declining.

On the other hand, reproduction in North Dakota has generally remained high and doves are typically plentiful the first few weeks of the season. Dove harvest in North Dakota has also declined in recent years – 38,000 birds harvested in 2000 – and this seems to be the trend nationwide.

Mourning doves are an exciting sporting challenge and provide wonderful table fare. Remember, doves migrate out of North Dakota early, so it is important to get out early in September for the best wingshooting opportunities.

Tundra Swans

Stan C. Kohn

Interest in swan hunting remains high. North Dakota can issue 2,000 swan tags each year and the number of hunters applying for these tags continues to increase (2,420 applicants in 2001). Hunter success has remained around 45-50 percent. Counties with the highest harvest in 2001 included, in descending

order: McLean, Burleigh, Kidder, Stutsman, Pierce, and Ward.

It is too early to predict what production will be like this year, but the number of breeding birds remains high. Even with average production, we should see good numbers of swans migrating through North Dakota in October.

Wild Turkeys

Lowell Tripp, *Upland Game Bird Biologist, Oakes*

North Dakota ranks number one in the nation for fall wild turkey hunting success, and state hunters will likely retain that standing in 2002. The Game and Fish Department issued a record number of fall wild turkey licenses this year, and hunters can expect to find many young birds in the population.

In 2001 we issued 6,622 permits to resident wild turkey hunters. Although overall harvest was not a record, hunters bagged 3,083 wild turkeys for 59 percent hunter success.

North Dakota's wild turkey population has been increasing slightly over the past several years. In many areas, local populations are approaching their carrying capacity.

North Dakota's wild turkeys have been increasing in recent years and in many areas, local populations are approaching carrying capacity.

Pheasants

Lowell Tripp

North Dakota pheasant hunters can expect another good season in 2002.

After a mild 2001-02 winter, the spring pheasant breeding population was up more than 10 percent statewide. Even though some parts of the state experienced marginal weather conditions during the nesting season, the rains came at a time when they probably did little harm to pheasant reproduction.

At the time of this writing, we don't know for sure what pheasant reproduction will be this year, but if it is average we can expect a good pre-hunt population. Hunters may find access more difficult this year due to widespread haying of CRP and other habitats. Drought conditions prompted the opening of CRP for haying.

Last fall, hunters bagged more than 420,000 rooster pheasants, the most since 1963. A high number of hunters accounted for much of this increase. Some of the best hunting occurred in the state's south-central region, along the Missouri River.



Harold Umber

Furbearers

Jacquie Gerads, *Furbearer/Disease Research Biologist*

Most trappers and predator hunters had a good season this past year, and can expect more of the same in 2002. Pelt prices are rising slightly and that should bring out more hunters and trappers.

The fur market outlook for red fox and muskrats continues to hold promise. New Asian markets continue to open and are once again using more North Dakota wild fur pelts, a positive sign for the wild fur business.

In 2001, harvest of most furbearing species, including coyote, fox, raccoon, and beaver increased from the previous year. Bobcat harvest was also up considerably, likely a result of higher prices later in the season.

Red fox are making a comeback in several areas of the state. A statewide outbreak of mange has depressed populations of both fox and coyote, but the good news is that mange appears to be moving out of the northeast area. The disease is, however, still prevalent in North Dakota fox and coyote, especially in the south central and southeast.

Spring survey data in 2002 indicate coyote and red fox populations were down slightly after slight increases the previous year. Coyote populations were up in the Missouri Coteau region, while fox were down in this region. Spring survey data also indicate raccoon populations are down, while badger populations are up slightly.

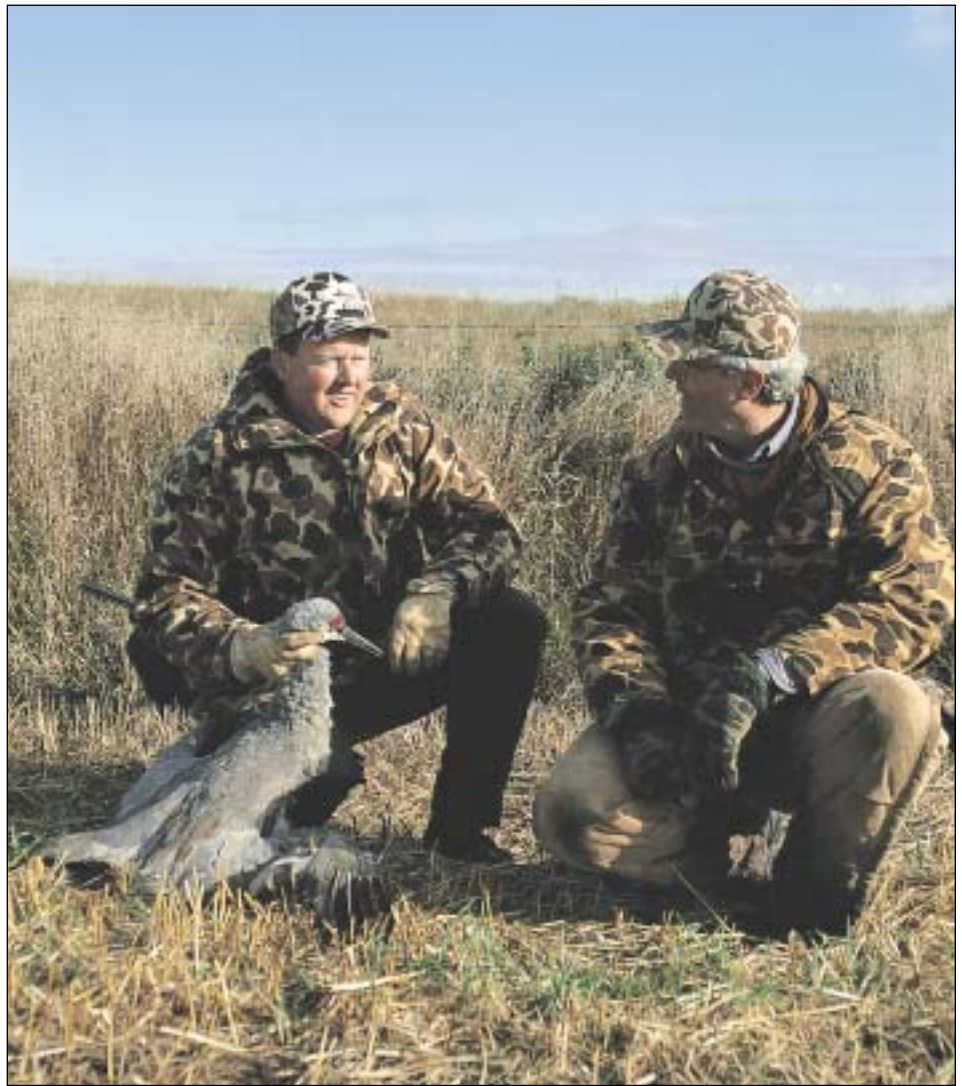
Survey data indicate muskrat and beaver populations are down slightly in all regions, though the number of damage complaints has increased. Special permits were issued again this past year in several counties and municipalities, to allow killing of muskrats causing damage inside road rights-of-way and lagoons. With relatively dry conditions over the past year, numerous marshes and ponds dried up and muskrats have been moving out in several areas.

Sage Grouse

Gerald Kobriger, *Upland Game Management Supervisor, Dickinson*

Sage grouse are a minor species in both numbers and harvest in North Dakota, but they are our trophy upland game bird. Production was poor last year and hunter success declined significantly.

Department personnel checked only 20 sage grouse taken by hunters last fall, compared to 56 the previous year. Worse yet, only four of the 20 birds were young



Scott Peterson, left, Dan Hare and others who shall remain nameless, meet annually for the "guaranteed crane and sharptail hunt" on a field to be named later.

of the year, which indicated low reproduction in 2001. About 27 percent of sage grouse hunters harvested a bird in 2001, compared to 53 percent in 2000.

In spring 2002, observers counted 167 male sage grouse on strutting grounds, down from 232 in 2000. A bright spot was 17 active grounds counted this spring, compared to 16 the previous year. While a couple of small grounds disappeared, surveyors saw strutting males on three grounds that were for years abandoned. One ground had not had a grouse on it for 26 years.

The Game and Fish Department does not conduct brood surveys for sage grouse. Much of the sage grouse range escaped severe storms and wildfire earlier this year, but cold, wet weather did occur in early June around the time of the peak sage grouse hatch. A late snowstorm could also have delayed or disrupted nesting. It is hard to predict the season on such limited data, but it will probably be about average.

Sharp-tailed Grouse

Gerald Kobriger

North Dakota residents seem to be forgetting about sharp-tailed grouse hunting and appear to be concentrating on pheasants and waterfowl. The number of resident sharptail hunters has declined more than 13 percent in the last two years. In the same span, the number of nonresident sharptail hunters has increased by more than 42 percent. The increase has offset the decrease so the number of hunters is about the same.

Sharptail production in 2001 was below average. Average brood size was only 5.5, below the long-term average of 7.4 young per brood. Wing data from the hunting season verified this lower production. The number of wings sent in by hunters was down 25 percent, which indicates a lower population, and the age ratio was only 1.83 young per adult, somewhat below the ratio (2.00) needed for stable or improving populations. The harvest in 2001 was just over 107,000 grouse, down

14 percent from 125,000 grouse taken in 2000.

The mild winter last year was a boon to all upland game. Warmer than average temperatures, below normal snowfall, and an excellent berry crop to provide winter food for grouse, apparently kept mortality to a minimum.

The 2002 spring census of male grouse on dancing grounds showed increases for most areas, which is unusual considering the low age ratio last year. Increases were fairly consistent over all areas – about 20 percent statewide – thus sharptails headed into the breeding season on a positive note.

This summer has been one of extremes, ranging from very wet in the northeast to very dry in south central North Dakota. All these make the crystal ball cloudy. Sharptail production in south central North Dakota will probably be below average, but the remainder of the state may be okay. Moisture in May and June may have provided habitat conditions for at least average production. We won't know for sure until summer brood surveys are completed in late August, after information for this magazine was compiled.

Hungarian Partridge

Gerald Kobriger

Hungarian partridge are about the only sour note in upland game populations in North Dakota. It has been nine years since the initial crash in partridge numbers that occurred in 1993.

While the population has fluctuated during the past few years, the first real increase noted in our brood surveys came in 2000, particularly in the southwest part of the state. Statewide brood data showed an increase of more than 200 percent from 1999 to 2000. While this sounds like a huge increase, when populations are low, small changes can seem much larger when expressed as percentages. The increase was from 3.4 to 10.4 birds per 100 miles of survey route.

Numbers dropped back to 6.3 partridge/100 miles in 2001. While below 2000, this is still above those years from 1994 to 1999. A good sign in 2001 was an increase in average brood size from 9.9 to 11.3.

We did not expect a terrific partridge season in 2001 and it wasn't. Harvest was 46,493 compared to 50,910 in 2000. The total harvest decline was a reflection of 14 percent fewer partridge hunters, although the number of partridge bagged per hunter actually increased slightly. The number of resident hunters was down 19 percent,

while the number of nonresident hunters increased a little over six percent.

Rural mail carriers count a variety of animals and birds for the Game and Fish Department while delivering mail on their routes. For a three-day period in April, they are asked to count partridge. The sample is usually between 60,000 and 70,000 miles, a much larger sample than Game and Fish personnel could ever achieve in a three-day period.

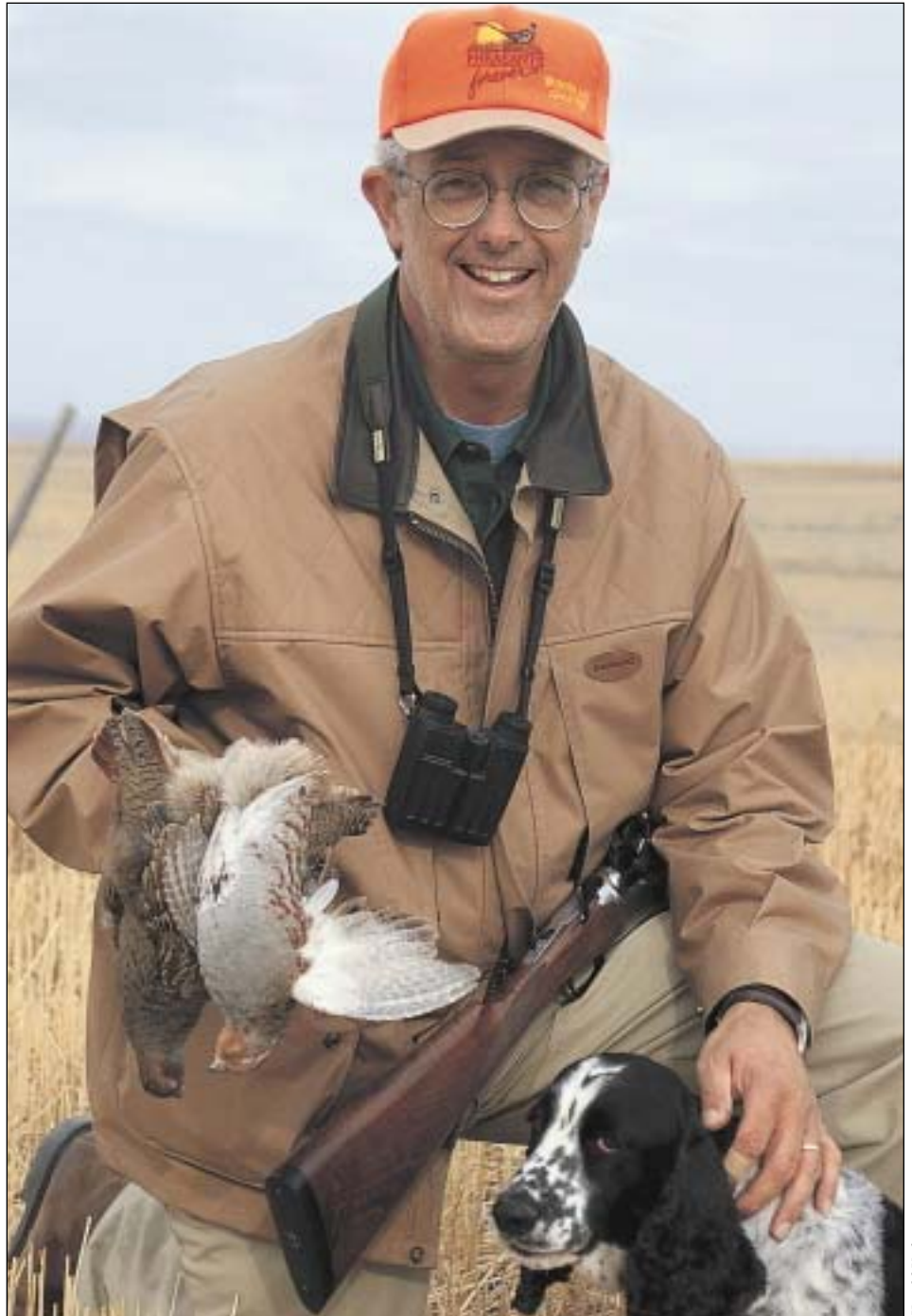
Rural mail carrier data show that partridge took a huge drop in 1993 and continued to decline to a low in 1998. A slow

recovery has occurred from 1998 to 2002, and RMC data for spring 2002 put the partridge population at the highest level since 1994. Perhaps they are indeed on the way back.

Peak partridge hatch is later than for either grouse or pheasant, and early summer fires and emergency haying and grazing may do more harm to partridge than other upland game birds. Partridge typically produce well in dry years.

RANDY KREIL is the Game and Fish Department's wildlife division chief.

The partridge population fell to drastically low levels after the wet summer of 1993. A slow recovery has occurred between 1998 and 2002 and good reproduction this summer should mean a few more birds in the bag.



Harold Umber